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What Really Happens When Prophecy Fails: The Case of Lubavitch

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Until fairly recently Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance has been the standard paradigm for understanding reactions to failed prophecy. This theory has been criticized on both empirical and theoretical grounds. Festinger's approach fails to pay sufficient attention to the perspectives and interpretations of followers, who are seen by him as irrational and driven by forces beyond their understanding. This paper examines messianic belief among Lubavitchers and discusses what happened when their leader died without revealing his messianic status. Following failed prophecy, Lubavitchers continued missionizing at the same high level as previously. The case material illustrates the fact that such an intense religious group as Lubavitch do not follow teachings blindly but are sane people who try to reason their way through facts and doctrine in pursuit of understanding. Lubavitchers dealt with this failure of prophecy by appealing to a number of post-hoc rationalisations. In accordance with Melton's (1985) theory, the messianic belief underwent a process of spiritualization.

INTRODUCTION

For religious groups there can be no greater disappointment than that which occurs after the failure of a major prophecy to materialize. The historical literature is replete with examples of groups who have predicted the end of the world and their reactions to failed prophecy. Stark (1996:137) asserts:

> Other things being equal, failed prophecies are harmful for religious movements. Although prophesies may arouse a great deal of excitement and attract many new followers beforehand, the subsequent disappointment usually more than offsets these benefits.

His argument is that in some instances members may leave the group and the group finally disintegrates. In other cases, members can withstand this catastrophic event and the group continues. However, he qualifies this statement by asserting that new religious movements are likely to succeed to the extent that

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their doctrines are non-empirical. Religious movements need not deliver on their promises in this world — their most valuable rewards are obtained in a reality beyond inspection.

The standard paradigm for understanding failed prophecy is based on cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, Reiken and Schachter 1956). Following their research on a flying saucer movement, Festinger and his colleagues argued that failure of prophecy resulted in intensification of belief and more enthusiastic proselytising by sect members. Proselytization, the attempt to convince outsiders of a belief system, was regarded as reducing cognitive dissonance. If more people adopt this belief it must after all be true. According to Festinger et al. (1956:3):

> Man's resourcefulness goes simply beyond protecting a belief. Suppose an individual believes something with his whole heart; suppose further that he has a commitment to this belief, but he has taken irrevocable actions because of it; finally suppose that he is presented with evidence, unequivocal and undeniable evidence, that his belief is wrong: What will happen? The individual will frequently emerge, not only unshaken but even more convinced of the truth of his beliefs than ever before. Indeed, he may even show a new fervor about convincing and converting other people to his view.

Festinger argued that for such a process to occur there must be firm conviction; there must be public commitment to this conviction; the conviction must be amenable to unequivocal disconfirmation; such unequivocal disconfirmation must occur; and lastly, social support must be available to the believer subsequent to the disconfirmation. To reduce psychological dissonance, Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance predicts that the dissonance produced by disconfirming information will be reduced by adding new cognitions consonant with the set of cognitions most resistant to change.

This theory, however, has come under some criticism by scholars of religion, on both methodological and theoretical grounds. The validity of their original research has been questioned (Melton 1985; Van Fossen 1988; Bainbridge 1997). Van Fossen (1988) refers to Festinger as a "radically deficient guide" to studying the effects of failed prophecy, whose work is tainted by subjectivity and bias. Although concerns have been raised in relation to the possible stimulating effect on the group by Festinger's researchers, there is no evidence that this in fact occurred (Batson and Ventis 1982).

Stone (2000) argues that studies on failed prophecy post-Festinger indicate that active proselytization is an uncommon occurrence. In most of the case studies discussed in his book *Expecting Armageddon: Essential readings in failed prophecy*, proselytization did not occur (Hardyck and Braden 1962; Balch, Farnsworth and Wilkins 1983). Similarly, Dawson (1999) argues that Festinger's approach is too narrow and that increased proselytization is only one way of reducing dissonance and is by no means the most common response. Bader (1999:120) states quite categorically, "Nevertheless, no case study of a failed

prophecy, his current research included, has provided support for the cognitive dissonance hypothesis."

Melton (1985) points out a number of problems with the thesis — the first problem being that the study's thesis rests upon historical error. The Millerites cited by Festinger (1956) disbanded after failed prediction that the world would end in the 1830s. The next problem involves Festinger's assertion that millennial groups are organized around the prediction of prospective events. This is seen by Melton as a one-dimensional view of millenarianism which neglects the presence of a complex cosmology. Indeed, prediction often springs from a broad context of belief and disconfirmation provides a "test" which generally strengthens a group. Third, the problem was noted of the researcher's standard for logic not necessarily being consistent with the internal definitions of the group studied.

In addition to contending that Festinger's approach was too narrow, many writers have claimed that his approach is too positivistic and he presents his subjects as irrational and driven by forces beyond their comprehension. In particular, it is argued that he fails to pay sufficient attention to the perspectives and interpretations of followers and the way they try to reason their way through facts and doctrine in pursuit of understanding.

A popular model for looking at failed prophecy is that of Zygmunt (1972) who suggests three modes of adaptation to prophetic failure: adaptation, reaffirmation and reappraisal. First, believers may acknowledge an error of dating such as occurred among the Millerites. Second, the blame may be shifted to some force inside or outside the group which interferes with the cosmic plan. Lastly, believers may postulate that the event in fact occurred but on the spiritual not on the material plane and was not, therefore, directly observable to believers. Building on Zygmunt's ideas, Melton (1985:21) argues "the denial of failure of prophecy is not just another option, but the common mode of adaptation of millennial groups following a failed prophecy." He suggests two additional modes of adaptation, those being social and cultural. The cultural or spiritualization mode means the groups tend to reinterpret the promise of a visible verifiable event into the acceptance of a nonverifiable, invisible event. The prophecy has come about on a spiritual plane. Members may however still experience dissonance and emotions such as sadness, fear, bewilderment and disappointment and it is for this reason that the prophecy must be reinterpreted. The social mode addresses emotional distress by placing an emphasis on renewing group ties after disconfirmation.

This paper reports on a contemporary messianic movement among a group of Hasidic Jews called Lubavitch. For many years the group have held their leader the Rebbe, to be the Messiah.[1]

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[1] See Scholem (1973) for a description of Sabbatai Sevi, the most infamous Jewish messianic pretender and Sharot (1982) for a description of other Jewish messianic figures.

METHODOLOGY

The qualitative data presented in this paper are derived from three years of fieldwork (1992–1995) in the Stamford Hill Lubavitch community. The researcher lived in the community while working part-time as a physician in a local hospital[2] and is Jewish, but does not consider himself to be religious and at no time formally joined the movement. The techniques of participant observation and informal interviews with members of the community were utilized and it was found that subjects were generally very cooperative. The particular focus during fieldwork was on the ways in which Lubavitchers dealt with sickness. However, beginning in 1993 there was intense messianic fervour in the community. During a six month period in 1993, thirty Lubavitchers were questioned in detail about their beliefs concerning the Rebbe and his messianic status, (i.e., could he die, would he be replaced?)[3] A convenience sample was used, with the majority of subjects being rabbis and only six of the thirty being women. Much of the interviewing was carried out in Lubavitch House, which is the main administrative centre of the movement in Stamford Hill. This building functions as a school, nursery, library, and resource centre. As well, lectures on mystical and messianic topics are regularly held there.

A number of messianic texts published by Lubavitch were consulted during the research, including Shochet's *Masiach*, and *Sound the great shofar: Essays on the imminence of the redemption*, which expose Lubavitch's official position on messianic matters. Additional data was derived from two videotapes featuring the Rebbe distributing dollars to visitors at "770," the Rebbe's residence, and a series of audiotapes entitled *The coming of Mosiach* by Rabbi Nissan Mindel.

As well as the time spent in Stamford Hill, a month was spent in Crown Heights, New York, visiting the Rebbe's residence. The time in Crown Heights was devoted to meeting the Rebbe, examining messianic propaganda such as books, cassettes and videos, and attending lectures and meetings about messianic topics. In particular the author met the Rebbe on two occasions and was given a dollar and a blessing

LUBAVITCHER HASIDISM

Lubavitch is a worldwide movement of Hasidic Jews whose main centre is in New York where its leader, the seventh Lubavitcher Rebbe, resided until his death from a stroke, in June 1994. This paper concentrates on the Stamford Hill community in England, which is an offshoot of this larger community in New

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[2] For detailed accounts of the movement, see Dein (1993) and Littlewood and Dein (1995).

[3] Some of the fieldwork data on failed messianism among Lubavitchers has appeared in Dein (1997). A study of this group's reaction to failed prophecy has been reported by Shaffir (1995).

York. Hasidism started as a Jewish pietistic movement in 18th century Eastern Europe and was founded by the Baal Shem Tov who was reknowned as a wandering preacher and miracle worker. The idea of *Devekut* was central, i.e. that one should be attached to God at all times and one's thoughts should always be on him (Epstein 1959). Hasidism favored the inner state of the worshipper as the primary value in the service of God, rather than their understanding of the tradition. Prayer, recited with exhalted joy and in a state of ecstatic fervor, was encouraged, in which man forgets self and surroundings, and concentrates all thoughts and feelings on union with God. Worship was possible through everyday physical activities such as eating, drinking and even sexual relations.[4]

A unique facet of Hasidism, and the way in which Hasidim differ from other ultra-Orthodox groups, is the idea of the *zaddik* or *rebbe*, a perfectly righteous man who is the spiritual leader of the group. This concept was introduced by the successor of the Baal Shem Tov, Rabbi Dov Baer of Meserich (1710–1771). The *zaddik* was held to perform miracles and act as a channel for divine energy to flow into this world — they sought the *zaddik*'s blessings for all their activities and told many stories about his wonderful deeds. Hasidim never seceded from the main body of traditional Judaism. The Hasidim are simply a group of Orthodox Jews who emphasize a different aspect of the tradition. Originally, they emphasized feelings over and above intellect. As Hasidism spread, it became closer to institutionalized orthodoxy. Today, the meticulous following of *Talmudic* norms and the study of *Torah* are the main tenets of religious life for Hasidim. Although Hasidic Jews share a great deal with other ultra-Orthodox groups, it is their doctrine of the *zaddik* which sets clear boundaries between Hasidim and non-Hasidim.

The Hasidic movement spread rapidly throughout Poland and was introduced to Lithuania by Rabbi Schneur Zalman (1746–1813), who founded the Lubavitch movement there (named after the town in Russia where the movement started). Throughout the 19th century Lubavitch battled to secure economic and political benefits for Jews. The 6th Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Joseph Isaac Schneerson (1880–1950), organized communities outside Russia. Despite the fact that the vast majority of Lubavitchers died in the Holocaust, the movement found a home in New York in the late 1940s. Today Lubavitch exists on a worldwide basis, the main centres being New York, London, Antwerp, Jerusalem and Tel Aviv.

Lubavitch is just one of a number of Hasidic groups in the U.K. The others, all ultra-Orthodox groups, include Satmar, Visnitz, Braslav and Gur. Lubavitch are distinguished from the other Hasidic groups because of the time spent proselytizing as part of their attempt to bring non-orthodox Jews back to

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[4] It is held by Lubavitchers that sexual relations have a mystical purpose, bringing back to God the sparks which have been scattered at the time of creation.

Orthodoxy. This derives from the mystical view that all Jews have a divine spark in them which can be ignited. It also emphasizes the study of mystical concepts by all, not just a scholarly or religious elite. There are also campaigns encouraging Jews to ensure that their religious artifacts such as *mezuzot* and *tefillin* are ritually pure.[5]

Satmar hasidism arose in Transylvania in the decades immediately preceding the Holocaust and rose to prominence primarily in the post-war years. It is identified with the personality of Yoel Teitelbaum (1888–1979). The movement, known for its opposition to Zionism, is based in Williamsburg, New York. The current Satmar Rebbe still expresses dismay at the willingness of Lubavitchers to interact with secular Jews and chides Lubavitchers for their belief that their leader is the messiah.

The Community

Stamford Hill is an area of three square miles in North London populated by Hasidic Jews, West Indians, and a number of Irish and Cypriot families. At present, there are approximately 200 Lubavitch families living there. The community is very close-knit and members have multiple social ties to other members of the community and usually to other Lubavitcher communities worldwide. There is a strong sense of community expressed by Lubavitchers and several people cited this as a reason for joining the movement. As one rabbi stated: "Lubavitch gives me a strong sense of belonging. When something goes wrong there is always support available even from people whom you do not know very well."

Men wear the traditional Hasidic clothing, black coats and black Homburg hats. Married women wear a *sheitel* (wig) with their hair cropped short. Hasidic residence, family life and education are totally determined by *Talmudic* law. There are fixed rituals for living one's daily life according to *Talmudic* teachings. Life centres around festival days and the Sabbath. So strong are the religious sentiments that not only religious affairs, but secular activities as well, are controlled and directed by religious prescription and authority.

The community is largely isolated from the outside world — mixing with *goyim* (non-Jews) is minimal, except for business purposes. The justification for not mixing with non-Jews among the ultra-Orthodox is that through friendship and intimacies, the temptation to stray from the law could become irresistible, thus the self-imposed segregation is seen as a precaution. There is strong gender segregation in the community and the domestic role of women is emphasized.

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[5] The first two paragraphs of the *Shema*, the affirmation of faith, should be written in ink on parchment, placed in a container and affixed to the door frame on the right hand side as you enter. This container, with its parchment, is called a *mezuzah*, meaning 'doorpost.' The *tefillen*, or 'prayer boxes' are two leather boxes with straps attached. They contain the four biblical passages which include the instruction "you shall bind them on your arms and they shall be an ornament between your eyes."

About 25 percent of the men have trained as rabbis, the others work as administrators, bookkeepers and shopkeepers. Many of the women teach in local Jewish schools. Unmarried men and women of adult age are forbidden to mix together unaccompanied. From the age of three, boys and girls are taught separately. Lubavitchers explain this segregation as a protection of the sanctity of the family.

The Messianic Idea in Lubavitch

The concept of the messiah in Lubavitcher Hasidism is defined in the writings of the founder of the sect, Schneur Zalman of Liady, and ultimately based on the writings of Maimonides, the great Jewish philosopher and codifier. According to the former, the messiah is no more than a successful *zaddik*. By cosmic fortune he connects them with heaven and demonstrates this through prophecies and miracles. In accordance with traditional Jewish teachings, there is an obligation to hope for and await the messiah and to demand his coming. Waiting for *mosiach* and anticipating his coming is not simply a virtue, but is a religious obligation akin to following the other commandments. According to Maimonides' Twelfth Principle of the Faith: "I believe with complete faith in the coming of Masiach. Though he tarry, nonetheless, I await him every day, that he will come."

Although the timing of the coming of the messiah is a guarded mystery unknown to man "it will happen in its time" (Isaiah 60:22), it is predetermined by God from the beginning of creation and is unconditional. It is held that *mosiach* can come any day, even before the predetermined date. His arrival can be hastened by the performance of good deeds, by repentance, and by the donation of charity.

A number of books outline Lubavitcher messianic ideas. R.J.I. Scochet, himself a Lubavitcher rabbi, has written *Masiach*, which is based on Maimonides' *Mishne Torah*, wherein he develops his two stage recognition process for the messiah. This condenses and summarizes rabbinic considerations of the matter. According to Maimonides, a candidate must be considered the messiah "if he is a king who arises from the house of David, meditates on the Torah, occupies himself with the commandments in accordance with the oral and written Torah, and prevails on all Jews to do so and fights the battles of God." If he succeeds at all this, and if he is seen to be prepared to rebuild the temple on its site and to regather the dispersed Jews, he is assuredly the messiah.

In each generation there is a potential messiah. The *zaddik* himself does not realize this potential. Because of mankind's sins, many such *zaddikim* have passed away. They did not merit that the messianic spirit was conferred upon them. Although they were fit and appropriate for this, the generation was not fit. To hold that a *zaddik* is a potential messiah is a normative Hasidic belief. However

only God knows whether he is the actual messiah and will reveal this to mankind in his own chosen time.

The Rebbe and His Miracles

The most recent Rebbe, Menachem Mendel Schneerson, has been described by Lubavitchers as "the most phenomenal Jewish personality of our time" (Lubavitch Publication1989). He became leader of Lubavitch in 1951. Until his death in 1994, he resided in Brooklyn at his residence "770" and for 40 years never left New York. He was born in Nikolaev in Russia in 1902 and was well known as a *Torah* prodigy (a young person with an exceptionally good knowledge of the *Torah*). He spoke ten languages fluently and held a degree in Electrical Engineering from the Sorbonne. Lubavitchers recount many miraculous stories about him. It was claimed that he slept for only an hour a day and fasted three days a week. He was attributed with the ability to communicate with the soul of the deceased Sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe and meditated at his graveside on a weekly basis in order to provide blessings for his followers. He was seen by his followers as having the power to predict miraculous events.

Lubavitchers refer to Rebbe Schneerson frequently in everyday conversation, discussing his teachings, directives, and extraordinary powers of perception and wisdom. Where possible, his discourses were transmitted to Lubavitcher communities around the world, and, on the Sabbath and holy days when broadcasting was forbidden, those present attempted to memorize his words and pass them on to their communities. He was a spiritual guide of the Lubavitch community in all matters. For several years prior to his death, he rarely held private audiences, but each Sunday morning in Brooklyn several thousand people visited "770" for a ceremony called "Dollars" at which he distributed dollars to everyone who visited him. He also gave them a blessing. Many people wrote to him about various matters, such as health, divorce, marriage and business. There are many stories in the Stamford Hill community of his miraculous abilities such as:

> Mrs Potash was deeply concerned about the whereabouts of her lost brother Mordechai, a twenty-seven year old man whom she had not seen for several months. The police had been looking for him in connection with fraudulent activity in which he allegedly had been involved. She had heard from a friend that he was somewhere in New York but she had no further information about the exact location. She arrived in New York but had no idea where to begin looking. She visited a family friend, himself a Lubavitcher, who advised that she visit the Lubavitcher Rebbe. "This zaddik" he explained, "is a famous miracle worker. Many people come to his door to ask for his blessing. Go to him. God's salvation comes in the blink of an eye."
>
> After waiting six hours at "Dollars," she stood in front of the Rebbe looking very trepidatious. She burst into tears, and without her saying a word, the Rebbe said "It's forbidden to give up hope," almost as though he understood what was on her mind. Distraught, she called a taxi to take her to her friend's house. The taxi driver asked her what was wrong and inquired if he

could be of any help. She started to talk about her brother. "What is he like?" asked the taxi driver. Mrs Potash took out a picture to show him. He went pale and started shaking. The brother in fact lived in the flat upstairs from his own!

THE MESSIAH CAMPAIGN

The issue of *moshiach* is a longstanding topic of discussion among Lubavitchers. Over the past few years, there has been an escalating interest in the advent of *moshiach* (the messiah) in the Stamford Hill community. In the early 1980s Lubavitch began a "We-want-Moshiach" campaign to popularize the belief that the arrival of the messiah was imminent. The campaign increased in momentum over the next few years, with frequent advertisements appearing in Jewish newspapers across Europe, Israel and America about the topic of *moshiach*. One popular advertisement entitled "Draw your own conclusion" stated:

> These are amazing times. The Iron Curtain has crumbled. Iraq is humbled. The people of Israel emerge from under a rainstorm of murderous missiles. An entire beleaguered population is airlifted to safety overnight. A tidal wave of Russian Jews reaches Israel. Nations around the world turn to democracy. Plus countless other amazing developments that are taking place in front of our eyes. Any of these phenomena by itself is enough to boggle the mind. Connect them all together and a pattern emerges that cannot be ignored. The Lubavitcher Rebbe emphasizes that these remarkable events are merely a prelude to the final redemption. The era of Moshiach is upon us. Learn about it. Be part of it. All you have to do is to open your eyes. Inevitably, you will draw your own conclusion.

Although the Rebbe never openly encouraged messianic expectation, nor ever publicly admitted to his messianic status, he did little to condemn it. A number of public statements were made by the Rebbe in relation to *moshiach*. Although *moshiach* was always a favourite topic of discourse for the Rebbe, on April 11, 1991, the contents of his discourse changed from his usual thoughts to an injunction: "What more can I do to motivate the entire Jewish people to actually bring about the coming of Moshiach? All that I can possibly do is to give the matter over to you now, immediately. I have done whatever I can: from now on you must do whatever you can."

Lubavitchers were stunned by this injunction and thus began new initiatives, such as organizing teachings and directives about the messianic redemption. As well, the Rebbe's talks on *moshiach* were published, classes were organized to teach messianic topics, *moshiach* became a major topic of discussion, and there was an escalation of messianic excitement in Lubavitcher communities in Europe and America.

Shortly afterwards, the Rebbe spoke not only about yearning for the coming of *moshiach*, but also about his imminent arrival: "Moshiach's coming is no longer a dream of a distant future, but an imminent reality which will very shortly become manifest" (April 1991).

In September 1991 the Rebbe stated that only if Jews believed with absolute certainty that the messiah would come as redeemer, would such an event occur. When the Jewish New Year was approaching, he said, "When the divine service of the Jewish people over the centuries is considered as a whole, everything that is necessary to bring about redemption has been accomplished. There is no valid explanation for the continuance of the exile."

The Rebbe's statement had a profound effect on the Stamford Hill Lubavitchers. *Moshiach* became a major topic of conversation, along with discussion of life after the redemption. Issues such as the types of food permitted after the redemption, were frequently discussed. One discussion centred around whether people would still have bodies at this time. Within a short time, Lubavitchers began to discuss not just the imminent arrival of *moshiach*, but the idea that the Rebbe himself was the most likely candidate to be *moshiach*. Books and seminars relating to messianic topics were published, and special Messiah Awareness Days were held in Stamford Hill. One Rabbi stated:

> Today, only one person fulfils the criteria for Moshiach. This is the Lubavitcher Rebbe. If pressed, all Lubavitchers will say he is Moshiach. There is no other candidate. We are nearly out of our predicament now. Many miraculous things are happening, such as the fall of Communism. Redemption is not yet here but we are in the beginnings of it. There is some debate among Lubavitchers concerning the Moshiach campaign. What is the best way to conduct it? Some say we should not say the Rebbe is Moshiach. I disagree with this. I feel that Lubavitchers must say that the Rebbe is Moshiach. I personally feel one cannot talk about one without the other. If you are seriously minded, there is nothing wrong with saying the Rebbe is Moshiach. It will not turn people off.

Lubavitchers were divided between those who believed that they should publicly announce that the Rebbe was the messiah, and those who strongly disagreed with this. As the messiah campaign grew in intensity, other ultra-orthodox Jewish groups, who were not sympathetic to the Lubavitch cause, publicly criticized Lubavitch. In February 1992, Rabbi Shach, himself an eminent Rabbi, branded the Lubavitcher Rebbe as a heretic, who harboured messianic pretensions.

In March 1992, the Rebbe suffered a stroke which rendered him speechless and paralysed him on the right-hand side of his body. Despite his profound incapacity to look after himself, his followers described the stroke as "mild." Following this, he was unable to give "Dollars," but his followers continued to write to him for blessings. His secretary would read the letters to him, following which he would gesticulate an answer by moving his head up or down. In Brooklyn, he would be seen frequently, but unpredictably, at prayer services, sometimes twice a day and sometimes less than once a week. In order to ensure that his followers would be present when he came out, his followers carried "*Moshiach*" bleepers which flashed "M H M is on the platform" (meaning *Melech ha Moshiach* – King *Moshiach*).

In April 1993, a "*Moshiach* Awareness" caravan tour was held in Stamford Hill. A motorcade of three specially prepared caravans known as "*Mitzvah* Tanks" embarked on a tour around Britain to provide information about the concept of *moshiach*, and its significance for Jewish life and belief. It was launched by the Mayor of Hackney, while a Hasidic band offered musical entertainment. A public discussion was held on the grounds of Lubavitch House in Stamford Hill which focussed on a number of messianic issues, including one talk entitled "Taking the first steps towards miracle making."

Discourse relating to the messiah increased rapidly in Stamford Hill from about 1993. Although some Lubavitchers were reluctant to publicly admit it, many held that their leader, Menachem Schneerson, was the messiah and they were waiting for him to reveal himself. In fact, in 1993, a group of women in Brooklyn prepared to crown the Rebbe, an event which other members found shameful. There was much excitement in the Stamford Hill community and many people spoke of the messiah being in our midst and of redemption being imminent.

Although many Lubavitchers privately admitted that the Rebbe was *mosiach*, the official response of Lubavitcher Hasidim when asked whether the Rebbe was *mosiach* was to carefully stop short of claiming outright that the Rebbe was or will be revealed as *mosiach*. When questioned by outsiders the invariable reply was threefold — that all Jews are required to believe in the coming of the messiah, that the *Talmudic* sources say that the messiah will arise from among the people and "do you know of anyone alive today who fits the bill better than the Rebbe?"

However some were not so sure. Mr Zeitlin, a forty-five year old Lubavitcher and a member of Lubavitch for sixteen years, stated:

> I suppose I am a heretic! Of course the Rebbe may be the Mosiach but so may another Rebbe. In every generation there is a potential Mosiach. The Rebbe is the most likely candidate, he's done as lot for Judaism, bringing people back etc. I think people want to be convinced about the Rebbe. Ten percent are convinced, eighty percent want to be convinced and ten percent are not sure. People go around with the group and follow whatever is said. They are like automatons. I prefer to have my own ideas. The Rebbe may be Mosiach but I am unsure. I hope he is. Although people say that he is better, I don't feel he is communicating with anyone."

Similarly, other Lubavitchers were quite sceptical about the Rebbe being *mosiach*. Sarah Levine was a thirty-eight year old married woman working as a librarian at Lubavitch House. She was married to another Lubavitcher librarian and the couple have four children. Her parents were not religious and she herself became an orthodox Jewess at the age of sixteen after attending several Lubavitch meetings in Manchester. Unlike her husband, who was known for his fiery temper, she came across as being very gentle. She had the following to say:

I cannot come to terms with the fact that the Rebbe is the Messiah. If Mosiach comes will he be the Lubavitcher Rebbe? I think he will be a Jew. I think a lot of this messianic behaviour is strange. They were even talking about making a crown to crown the Rebbe as Mosiach on his anniversary. This would have cost thousands of dollars. My son is embarrassed to go to 770. He does not think it is the right thing to do with all this fuss about Mosiach. Hashem (God) dictates when the time is right, he must give some sign that the time is right. The people cannot force the Mosiach to reveal himself. I think Lubavitchers have been enforcing this role on the Rebbe. Because of this stress the Rebbe has become ill.

I feel I should be a believer. I don't want to do the wrong thing. If, God forbid, I was wrong, what would be my position? I do not feel the Rebbe can be wrong. People do not entertain the idea that the Rebbe could die. Outsiders ask who will follow him? Lubavitchers believe that the Mosiach will not die. I believe the Rebbe is only human and will die. I don't know what will happen then. It frightens me. Where would people be and what would they say. Would they say that they were wrong? Would they say that he is coming back?

Although the Messiah campaign is important there are many other problems to worry about in the community. . . . The financial situation is very bad here, many of us are not being paid. If you ask questions you are given the cold shoulder. Lubavitch does not have money for paying its employees. With all this talk about Mosiach, they can't even behave well man to man.

If someone does not believe in all of this, can they call themselves a Lubavitcher? . . . I should not really be saying all of this. It may be a sin. Perhaps the Rebbe knows that I'm criticising him. Something may happen to me. In his book *Wonders and miracles* there are stories about people who have gone against the Rebbe's advice and have been harmed. Someone was told to close their shop on the Sabbath which they refused to do and the shop burnt down. There is another story about Kappel Rosen, the founder of Carmel College. He unfortunately had leukemia. Someone gave him a copy of *Tanya*. As soon as he started to read it he got better. He went to the Rebbe and told everyone this story about the *Tanya*. The Rebbe said you should not have made a big noise about this. Shortly afterwards, he relapsed.

THE REBBE'S ILLNESS

In Stamford Hill, the Rebbe's illness was a frequent topic of discussion. Publicly, Lubavitchers stated that the Rebbe would recover, that his stroke was a significant event which would usher in the Messianic era. Talk of the *moshiach* increased and the fact that the Rebbe cold not talk did nothing to detract Lubavitchers from the messianic belief.

A number of *post hoc* explanations were given for the Rebbe's illness, derived from various biblical and *Talmudic* sources. They referred to the writings of Maimonides to argue that the Rebbe himself had chosen to become ill and had taken on the suffering of the Jewish people. It was a process he had to go through before revealing himself. The Rebbe was, as Maimonides had described, "A man of pains and acquainted with sickness. Indeed, he has borne our sickness and endured our pains (Isaiah:52-53)." Lubavitchers attempted to restore the health of the Rebbe by the recitation of Psalms. Every day Lubavitchers were encouraged to say extra Psalms. Shortly after his first stroke, a *Sefer Torah* (scroll

containing the text of the *Torah*) was written in New York and every Lubavitcher was asked to donate £1 towards a letter. The aim of writing this was to perfect the Rebbe's soul and, in turn, his body. This was explained to me in the following way:

> All Jewish souls are tied to the Rebbe's soul. In the Torah there are 600,000 words (328,000 complete words and 272,000 incomplete words). In the world there are 600,000 general souls (each divides up into many more souls). These general souls are linked to the Rebbe's soul. By writing a perfect Torah, the Rebbe's soul becomes perfect again and this will affect his body. The Rebbe must first undergo a descent into the realms of evil to redeem the souls of the sinners. This descent on the spiritual plain is associated with physical sickness.

The Rebbe had another stroke in March 1994, almost two years after the first. This time he was rendered comatose. From the time of his stroke on March 10, until his death on June 12, 1994, he was on a ventilator and never regained consciousness. There was much consternation in the Stamford Hill community and the Rebbe's sickness was the focus of the community. Despite various newspaper reports alleging that the Rebbe was "brain dead" or "without brain function," some of his followers continued to hold fast to their belief that he was the *moshiach*. When questioned about the meaning of the Rebbe's stroke, the answers given were *moshiach*, and "we are on the threshold of the Messianic era." Messianic propaganda increased in intensity. Extra meetings were held where Psalms were said. Thousands of followers slept in the hospital where the Rebbe lay, reciting Psalms in the hope that he would arise.

During this period, I interviewed several Lubavitchers about his illness. Although no-one publicly discussed the possibility that he could die and who his successor would be (the Rebbe had no children to succeed him), privately, several people admitted that his death was a possibility. One person said, "I know the Rebbe is a great man, but he is human after all and he is about 90 years of age. I think he could die. I hope for the sake of Lubavitch that he does not but we must face this possibility. If he dies, how will Lubavitchers account for his death and what will happen to the Messianic belief?"

Publicly, however, the "party line" was that this illness signified the imminent arrival of the messianic era and forthcoming redemption. Rabbi Rabin stated:

> The Rebbe is now in a state of concealment. The Jews could not see Moses on Mount Sinai and thought he was dead. They built the golden calf and had a vision of him lying dead on a bier, whereas he was in fact alive and in a state of concealment. The Rebbe is in a state of Chinoplet, a trancelike state where the soul leaves the body. The soul of the Rebbe has to go down to lower realms to drag up the souls of the sinners. He must do this before he declares himself as Moshiach. The spiritual energy required to bring Moshiach is very great and his body is depleted of energy. It is only now that we have the medical technology to keep him alive. We should not be sad. The attitude to adopt is one of *Simha* (joy). We are of course sad that the Rebbe is suffering but must be joyful that he is undergoing the process of transformation to reveal himself as Moshiach.

Even though Hasidim emphasize joy in the face of adversity, during the three months leading up to his death, Lubavitchers were very much subdued. A notice was distributed to Lubavitch House regarding how people should act at this time, emphasizing that Lubavitchers should learn the Rebbe's teachings, perform good deeds, give charity and support their neighbours, and recite Psalms. Even when the Rebbe was comatose and attached to a ventilator, his followers continued to write for blessings. His secretary would stand over his sick bed and read them to him. New miracle stories appeared, such as the one below which was circulated around the community shortly before the Rebbe's death.

> Dr. Fink, one of the Rebbe's physicians, was travelling up to a hill in New York. The car in front of him had a trailer attached. Suddenly the trailer came loose and started to roll backwards. Dr. Fink saw a vision of the Rebbe in front of his car, holding the trailer up, giving the physician enough time to escape. It is reported that Dr. Fink had never met the Rebbe before he went into a coma.

Every day, faxes were received from Beth Israel Hospital in New York, outlining the Rebbe's medical condition. Slight improvements were taken as signs of imminent recovery and ascension to the messianic role. His medical condition deteriorated considerably during the last two weeks of his life. In May 1994, he had pneumonia, from which he recovered, and several days before his death, he had a cardiac arrest and was resuscitated. Still his followers did not give up hope and claimed that he would get up from his sick bed and proclaim he was the messiah.

MESSIANIC BELIEF AFTER THE REBBE'S DEATH

The Rebbe never regained consciousness and died on 12th June 1994. His death was reported in the major tabloids, as well as on radio and television. The *Times* newspaper reported the event as follows:

> The death of the Rebbe, Menachem Shneerson, seventh leader of the Lubavitcher Rabbinic Dynasty, brings to a close a remarkable career which culminated in his followers' claim that he was about to be revealed as the Messiah. His face, with its piercing blue eyes and black Fedora, was familiar throughout with photographs in thousands of shops, offices and homes in the Jewish world. During his 55-year stewardship, the Lubavitch movement was transformed from a practically moribund branch of Hasidism to a powerful and international movement, deploying all the resources of modern communication technology to spread its message.

A message was faxed from the Rebbe's residence "770" to the Stamford Hill community at the time of the Rebbe's death which said "Blessed be the divine judge," meaning that God had ordained that the Rebbe should die.

I arrived at Lubavitch House several hours after the Rebbe had died, having heard the news on a local radio station. The atmosphere was subdued. I was

struck by the small number of people there and was told that most of the community immediately flew to New York for the funeral. Some were praying, others saying *Tehillim* (Psalms), while other Lubavitchers stood in groups talking. I could see no-one crying. After an hour, more and more people assembled in the Synagogue. I was able to discuss with them what had happened. There was a distinct lack of leadership, no-one knew exactly how to proceed.

"Do we sit *shiva?*" (7 days of ritual mourning), asked one man. "The Rebbe is not our immediate family." Some answered that it was necessary to sit *shiva* for several hours only, others suggested a day and others said a week. Everyone agreed that, at the time of the funeral, they do *keriah* (rending garments) and someone was appointed to perform this task.

As the day proceeded, more and more people assembled in the Synagogue and attempts were made to establish a satellite link between Lubavitch House and NBC, the American news channel, which was due to broadcast the funeral live.

Until the moment of his burial, there was still a feeling of hope expressed by those present. "The Rebbe could still arise and proclaim himself as *moshiach*," said one student. With the room completely full with Lubavitchers, some stood reciting Psalms, some observed the funeral procession by satellite, and yet others tore their clothes. On satellite, a group of Lubavitchers could be seen dancing and singing in anticipation of his resurrection and the imminent redemption. Suddenly, one man shouted he could hear the *shofar* (ram's horn) which announced the arrival of *moshiach*. After the burial, some Lubavitchers left, others continued to say *Tehillim*.

The following morning, everyone was asking why he had died and what it meant for the arrival of *moshiach* and the future of Lubavitch. Two days after his death, a statement was made by a spokesman for the Lubavitch movement emphasizing how much good work had been done by the Rebbe and how Lubavitchers now had the job of bringing forth the coming of the redemption. In it, he stated:

> By sharing with us his vision, his hopes and his promise, and by making us active participants in the perfection of God's world, the Rebbe has empowered us in the way that every parent can hope to empower his or her children. Handicapped as we are now with the loss of his physical presence, we rededicate ourselves to continue to accomplish that which our beloved Rebbe taught through his life's work for a humanity uplifted by good and a world sanctified and redeemed by God.

Several themes soon emerged in relation to his death. Many Lubavitchers expressed the idea that he would be resurrected. Most emphasized that he still had a major presence in the world and that, without the hindrance of his physical body, his spiritual presence was even greater. Everyone expressed a feeling that they must continue, and hope and pray for the messianic arrival and redemption. However, very soon, the overwhelming feeling in the community

was that the Rebbe would resurrect and that the redemption would arrive. I spoke to one 18-year-old Lubavitcher who stated:

> All Lubavitchers believe the Rebbe is Moshiach. We still believe this. It is not impossible that the Rebbe will be resurrected. The Rebbe has great power now. His spiritual presence is even greater now in all the world. People still write to him for a blessing, although, of course, they do not get a reply but there is a response. Things are happening.

Some Lubavitchers, however, admitted that they had been wrong. One Rabbi said:

> Concerning Moshiach: up till now we thought that we knew the script, the series of events that were going to happen in the process of the revelation of Moshiach. The Rebbe never actually told us a script, but we thought we should make it up. Now we realize we do not know the script. We should try to understand that this is not surprising. The coming of Moshiach is the drawing of the infinite into the finite, this is very difficult. It is quite beyond ordinary reason. It is understandable we do not know the steps which led to this.

Following his death, Lubavitchers started to visit the Rebbe's tomb. Today, people wait in line to deposit small pieces of paper on the tomb with requests for a blessing written on them. Others write to the Rebbe's secretary with their request. He takes them to the tomb and reads them to the Rebbe. There are a growing number of miracle stories about people who have visited his grave. For instance,

> Mr. Rubin was in great financial despair recently having gone bankrupt. He went to the Ohel (Rebbe's tomb) and left a request for a blessing to save his business. Shortly after he returned home, he unexpectedly received a letter from a distant relative informing him that they were willing to give him money to save his business.

It is now more than 5 years since the Rebbe's death. Even now, in Stamford Hill, people continue to talk about the Rebbe being *moshiach*. Although some people make their views public, the organization running Lubavitch has stated that, because of reactions of other people, these views should be kept private. Lubavitchers in Stamford Hill seem to be getting on with their lives, although the Rebbe's influence remains prominent. For many, the belief that the Rebbe is the *moshiach* has not decreased in any way. The following statement was published in *Lubavitch Magazine* in August 1994:

> Some antagonists had initially predicted a diminishing of Lubavitch activity after the Rebbe's passing, or even a complete breakdown and collapse of Lubavitch. Thank God, the doomsayers were proven false, and their bad predictions did not materialize. On the contrary, we are witnessing a worldwide spur of new activities, projects and institutions established in the Rebbe's honour.

The December 1994 issue of World of Lubavitch listed ninety-three institutions which have been established since the Rebbe's death. A recent article in the *London Jewish Chronicle* entitled "Still Waiting for the Messiah" (Paul 1999) states:

> From evidence of the incredible building works for Lubavitch, synagogues, study centres, seminaries and social services across the globe, it is business even better than usual. And that is an impression underpinned by the fact that, in the five years since the Rebbe's death, hundreds of new emissaries have been dispatched to bolster colleagues already serving in communities as far apart as Alaska and Nepal.

ADAPTATION TO FAILED PROPHECY

The data demonstrates that even such an intense religious group as Lubavitch are not a group of fanatics who follow doctrine without question. They are sane people trying to reason their way through facts and doctrine in the pursuit of understanding. Even when the Rebbe was alive the messianic belief was contested and some Lubavitchers did have doubts about the Rebbe's messianic status. Lubavitchers have coped with this failed prophecy by appealing to a number of rationalizations which not only preserve, but enhance, their commitment to messianic prophecy. Several members stated that although the Rebbe was a potential messiah, the generation did not possess enough merit to warrant his coming, i.e. it was their fault. Another explanation was that it is only God who knows when the messiah will arrive. Lubavitchers thought that they knew the script, but were wrong. Men cannot know God's intentions.

However, one of the most common explanations was that even though the Rebbe was dead, without the hindrance of his physical body, he was, in fact, more powerful spiritually and was better able to bring on the coming redemption. Relatedly, Melton (1985) argues that if a prediction fails, the members of the group do not abandon the movement, but aim to resolve the dissonance while relying on the "unfalsifiable beliefs out of which religious thought worlds are constructed and within that context believers can engage in a reaffirmation of basic faith and make a reappraisal of their predicament." The empirically testable belief that the Rebbe is the messiah has changed into a supernatural unfalsifiable belief that he is more powerful in the spiritual world. As the Rebbe stated after the death of his predecessor:

> And the *Alter Rebbe* (first Lubavitcher Rebbe) explains, that the *Zohar* also means to say that the *Zaddik* is present in this physical world more than during his life on this world. He also tells us that after the departure of the *Neshemo* (soul) from this world, the *Neshemo* of the *Zaddik* generates more strength and more *Koach* (power) to his devoted disciples (Chabad Newsletter, September 1994).

Stark (1996) proposes a number of propositions specifiying the necessary and sufficient conditions for the success (or failure) of religious groups. He

emphasizes the costs of religious participation and analyzes religious membership in terms of a cost benefit analysis (see also Warner 1993, Stark 1997, Finke 1997 and Young 1997). Some of these conditions are pertinent to the success of Lubavitch. Lubavitchers do maintain a medium level of tension with their surrounding environment. They are strict but not too strict. They generate a highly motivated religious labour force with the aim of proselytizing. There are high levels of fertility offsetting member mortality. Children are socialized sufficiently to minimize defection. They form strong internal attachments while maintaining and forming ties to outsiders. It is evident that these factors played an important role in militating against the group breaking up when the Rebbe died.

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